Mithilā—A Centre of Early Indian Trade and Commerce

MD. Aquique

The ancient Mithilā which was bounded on the north by the Himālaya, on the south by the Gaṅgā, on the east by the Kośī, and on the west by the Gaṇḍaka, is now-a-days covered by the erst-while modern districts of Darbhanga, Muzaffarpur, Camparan, Saharsa, Purnea, north Monghyr and north Bhagalpur, as well as the Terai under Nepal laying between the district and lower ranges of the Himālayas.

Mithilā was predestined by its geographical structure to be one of the great breeding-grounds of humanity. In the diversity of its natural conditions it forms a whole India in itself, but it is kept to itself by comparative isolation. It is the great land of asceticism, which seeks to enrich spiritual life by detaching the individual from his surroundings, and it owes its complex originality to its separation from the rest of our planet. This is the land of the Janaka, whose capital was at Janakpur about 18 miles from Jayanagar in Madhubani district. The land is also known as part of Videha and that is why Sītā, the daughter of King Janaka, is also known as Vaidehi. Being intersected by rivers and streems, the area is also known from the ancient days as Tīrabhukti (the land of the river banks). It was the earliest Aryan settlement in eastern India and from here the wave of Aryanism spread over other parts of the country.

Mithilā rose into eminence under the Janakas and acquired a special political status under the Lichchhavis. After her annexation to Magadh by Ajātaśatru, the country became the cynosure of all the important powers of India like the Mauryas, the Śuṅgas, the Kuṣāṇas, the Guptas, the Vardhanas, the Gurjar-Pratihāras, the Pālas and the Rāṣṭrakūṭas[1] etc. The question natu-

1 For details of political history, see, Thakur, U., *History of Mithilā*; also see Aquique, Md., *Economic History of Mithilā*, chap. II.

rally arises as to what was alluring the powerful rulers of India in the different periods to capture and occupy this land. Was it purely for the fame with which the city was associated ? Did it stand merely for the symbol of sovereignty over the whole of India or north-eastern India in particular ? We have not given sufficient attention to these questions as yet. In our opinion behind every conquest of territory, there must be certain motives. It is true that the growth of the political power was primarily the result of its ambition for territorial expansion. But at the same time the existence of economic factors behind political activities cannot be overlooked. In other words, the prospects of economic gains appears to be a most important motivating factor, 'as the love for gain is an inborn instinct of man'.[2]

Mithilā, in early times, was a great commercial centre. Facilities for smooth communication have been the life blood of prospective trade throughout the ages. Since the land was intersected by nearly twenty rivers and many lakes, trade in Mithilā was in a properous condition and there were numerous land and river-routes to carry articles to and from different places. Ancient Indian literature is replete with references to the maritime and caravan trade, which prove that the sea as well as the land routes were freely used by the Maithilās in early times, as highways of international commerce. Important river routes were through the streams of the Gaṅgā, the Kośī and the Gaṇḍaka which formed the main artery of inter-state commerce. Being a great centre of trade, Mithilā was frequented by merchants big and small. We are told that a disciple of Buddha took cart-loads of articles and went to Videha for trade.[3] The people of Śrāvastī visited Videha to sell their wares.[4]

Mithilā was connected with the principal cities like Rājagṛha, Gayā, Campā, and Pāṭaliputra by kacchā unbridged road, as was the case with most of the ancient tracks everywhere. There were also routes connecting Mithilā with the important commercial centres of the country, viz., Śrāvastī, Kauśāmbī, Vārāṇasī, Rājagṛha and Tāmralipti[5]. We learn from the *Jātakas* that the

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2 Vide Sircar, D. C., Ed., *Early Indian Trade and Industry*, p. 84.

3 *Paramatthadīpanī* on the *Theragatha*, Sinhalese Ed., III, pp. 277–78.

4 Law, B. C., *Kṣatriya Tribes*, pp. 129–30.

5 For details of routes, see Aquique, MD., *op. cit.*, p. 141 ff

merchants from eastern India went with their caravans in the North-West. Probably this shows that there were a trade routes from Videha to Gandhāra via Kashmir, Magadha to Sauvīra, Rājagṛha to Śrāvastī, and Campā to Tāmralipti[6]. From Mithilā also students used to proceed for their studies to Taxila[7]. Unless road communications existed, students like Pinguttara could hardly have gone to Taxila from Mithilā.

There are references to sea-trade which seems to be an important part of commerce of the Mithilā. The *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*[8] frequently refers to sea and navigation by sea-going vessels. We find in the *Jātaka* stories that in all great cities of eastern India, viz. Campā, Śrāvastī, Vārāṇasī, Rājagṛha and Videha, there were merchants engaged in sea-borne trade, and they sailed to foreign lands for transacting business. Thus, the traders of Campā sailed to Suvarṇabhūmi for trade purposes[9]. The *Nāyadhammakahāo*[10] further states that the seafaring merchants of Campā loaded their carts with four kinds of merchandise, viz., those which could be counted (gaṇina), balanced (dharima), measured (mava), and scrutinised. From the *Mahājanaka Jātaka* we know that an adventurous person (prince Mahājanaka) could go to Suvarṇabhūmi for trading purposes and return home with profit. How such an adventure was undertaken can be seen from the following details :

A son asks his mother : "Have you any money in hand? If not, I will carry on trade and make money and seize my father's kingdom". From Mithilā in Videha, selling a part of the store of pearls, jewels and diamonds, he brought his stock in trade, he put it on board a ship with some merchants bound for Suvarṇabhūmi. His mother tried to dissuade him saying that the sea had "few chances of success and many dangers", but still he embarked on a ship which carried seven caravans with their beasts and commodities. After travelling

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6 *Ibid.*, p. 127.
7 Jā, VI, no. 546, p. 173.
8 XVII, p. 7-8.
9 Jā. VI, no. 539, p. 34.
10 VIII, p. 98.

from 700 leagues, his ship was wrecked[11]. Vaiśālī in Mithilā also figures as an important port[12], and a trading centre in the Indian historical tradition from where colonists sailed down the Gaṅgā and the Bay of Bengal to distant Ceylon[13], to colonise it and to rule over it.

The above accounts thus shows that traders of Campā, Vaśālī, Mithilā, and Rājagṛha were carrying on brisk overland trade in early period. They established their colonies in those far-off islands and founded a city in Indo-China after the name of their famous city, Campā[14]. Similarly the Maithilas also established their colonies in Yunnan and named certain towns and principalities after Mithilā and Videha[15]. Our sources reveal that Mithilā had also trade relations with China, Tibet, and Nepal since remote past[16].

It appears that like other parts of India, Mithilā too had commercial relations with the western world, viz., Rome, Arab, Persia, and Babylonia, through the ports of Bharukaccha (Broach) and Suppāraka (Sopārā). We are told in the *Bāvāru Jātaka* that how certain merchants from Mithilā came to Bharukaccha to sail either to eastern region like Suvarṇabhūmi or first to Neucratis or Memphis and subsequently to Alexandria in the West, as it was then the most important sea-port in western India or later to Clesiphon, Rome, Antioch or Constantinople[17].

Trade of early period was carried on individually, in partnership, and through the guild organisation. Instances of this type of trade are gleaned from the *Jātaka* stories, where we find, that the two traders of Śrāvastī became partner and went to the west with a caravan.[18] A *Jātaka* mentions the horses

11 Cf. Saletore, R. N., *Early Indian Economic History*, p. 315; Also see, Jā. VI, no. 539, p. 34.

12 *The Rāmāyaṇa*, I, 45

13 Cf. *The Vaddas of Ceylon* : Buddhist Studies, Ed. by Law, p. 718.

14 *Homage*, p. 23.

15 Lakṣman Jha, *Mithilā will Rise*, p. 13; also see Thakur, U., *op. cit.*, pp. 83-84.

16 For details, see Aquique, MD. *op, cit.*, p. 128 ff.

17 Cf., Saletore, R. N. *op cit.*, p. 284.

18 *Jā.*, II, 181.

imported from the north to Benares,[19] another mentions a deal in birds exported from India to Babylonia,[20] and yet another pots and pans[21] etc. Similar may have been the case with the traders of Mithilā.

Our sources reveal that there was a constant interchange of all sorts of merchandise throughout India, ranging from the humblest commodity to the rarest luxury. Thus, we find the merchants from Gandhāra visiting Videha,[22] Orissa merchants visiting Rājagṛha,[23] Rājagṛha Seṭṭhis to Vaiśālī,[24] and other places for inland trade transactions. Like other parts of India, in Mithilā too, market was the centre of local inland trade. We get references to markets in Mithilā, where the traders were localised in different streets or mohallas, a practice still in vogue there. The *Maha-ummaga Jātaka* states that at the four gates of the town of Mithilā, there were four market towns, called the east town, the south town, the west town, and the north town (Mithilāya pana catūsu dvāresu pācinayavamajjhako dakkiṇayavamajjhako pacchimayavamajjhako uttarayavamajjhoko ti cattāro nigamā)[25]. Out of these towns, the east market town seems to have had a reputation for wisdom (yavamajjhakayāmavasino kira paṇḍita)[26]. That such towns were inhabited by merchants can be seen from the words of King Videha, who granted this east market town as a gift from him to a merchant saying : "Enjoy this east market town as a present from a King—let the other merchants be subordinate to him" (Rājā tusstvā gaṅdhodaka peṇṇaṁ Suvaṇṇabhiṁakārram ādāv pācina gāmani rājabhogena...bhuñja ti" seṭṭhissa hattha udakam pātetvā, sessaseṭṭhino ētassasēva upaṭṭhaka hontū."[27] From this specific statement we may see that how Mithilā was flanked on each quarter by a market town (nigamā), which was evidently not only under the control of a king but it could be disposed of by him as a gift to anyone

19 *Ibid.*, p. 31.
20 *Ibid.*, III, 126-27.
21 *Ibid.*, I, III.
22 *Ibid.*, III, 365.
23 *MU*, I. 4, 2.
24 *Ibid.*, VIII.. 1. 2.
25 *Jā.*, VI, no. 546, p. 157.
26 Jā., VI, no. 546, p. 166.
27 *Ibid.*, p. 171.

he pleased. Each of these market towns was specifically intended for merchants and, in case a town of this nature was granted as a present to another merchant by the king, then under his specific orders the other merchants, who remained in such a town, were directed to be under the control or authority of the donar.[28] Kauṭilya prescribed the same methods for the traders,[29] who generally carried on inland trade. Kālidāsa, too gives a very good description of the town market and its business transactions, by describing an urban market place (Vipani) with big ships lived both sides of the highway.[30] These instances reveal that for the development of inland trade markets were set up, where a portion of the village produce was sold, and probably it was from here that the surplus produce was handed over to big traders and merchants who despatched it to trade-centres in oiher parts of the country.

The articles of inland trade included all sorts of commodities for everyday use and it was obtained in the shape of exports and imports of different regions. Thus, Mithilā exported rice, wheat, pulses, oil, ghee, tobacco, jute, cotton clothes, and herbs, oil, wax, vermillion to Rājagṛha, Campā, Vārāṇasī and other places. Mithilā imported camphor, sandal-wood, salt, silk, and woollen garments from Bengal; opium, salt, stone articles, thread, paper from Rājagṛha; gold, copper, iron, and mica from south Bihar; limestone, mixed woollen and cotton cloths and silk from Campā, cotton and silk clothes from Vārāṇasī; pepper, coral and sandal-wood from south India; elephant from Kaliṅga, Aṅga and Assam, and horses from north-western India.

Unlike the traders of other parts of India, the traders of Mithilā did not rest with sending their cargoes to the markets of west, central Asia, south-east Asia and Nepal etc. As Mithilā was connected with the ports of Tāmralipti and Bharukachha,[31] she sent her cargoes from those ports and thus maintained a regular maritime relation with the foreign world. The exports of Mithilā consisted mainly of its native products. But, it appears that apart from it, she specialised in transhipping of skins and furs, although they came principally

28 Cf. Saletore, R. N., *op. cit.*, pp. 402-403; Also see, Aquique, Md., *op. cit.*, p. 136.

29 *Arth.*, II., 4.

30 *Raghu.*, XIV, 30, XVI, 41.

31 For details of routes, see Aquique, MD. *op. cit.*, p. 139 ff.

from Nepal and Tibet. Similarly silk was imported from China and transferred into luxurious fabrics and then exported to foreign market. Precious wood was another valuable export which Mithilā produced in great quantities or obtained through neighbouring states. This included the sandal wood, gums and resins etc. There was also an export trade in fragrant garlands made of various berries, flowers and leaves. The other exports were cloves, sesame, indigo, varieties of barberry, opium, jute, sugarcane, rice, millet, some fruits such as cocoanut, banana, melons, peaches, cucumber and onions etc. Besides many other commodities, such as high quality side arms, edible spices, tobacco, perfumes, muslins, talking parrots and tame monkeys etc., were also exported to foreign markets. The imports of Mithilā consisted chiefly of tin, lead, glass, steel, lead, coral, coarse clothing, silk, pearls, purple, silver, gold, topaz, a great quantity of dates, and amber.

Ancient literature reveal that the traders had to pay numerous levies including road cess (vārtāni) and octroi duties (śulka), of which we find an elaborate discussion in the *Arthaśāstra* of Kauṭilya.[32] According to Manu, traders should be taxed on the profit (increase of capital) and not on the capital outlay; and it should be at the rate of five per cent.[33] Yājñavalkya also supports this rate, and holds that the tax evaders had to pay eight times the original amount.[34] Manu further adds that profits should be determined with reference to *Yogaksheman*, e. g., according to the trouble and labour involved in producing things as well as preserving them. The same thing occurs in the *Mahābhārata*[35] etc. But how far this rate was applicable is difficult to determine.

As regards the prices of commodities, Yājñavalkya says that the king, having in mind the interest of the buyer and seller, was to fix the price allowing five per cent profit on indigenous goods and ten per cent on foreign products if buying and selling was done on the same day.[36] According to Manu,[37] at the

32 *Arth.*, 21, 22.

33 *Manu.* VIII, p. 398.

34 *Yāj.*, II, pp. 261–62.

35 *SP*, LXXX, 16.

36 *Yāj.* II, pp. 251–53.

37 VIII, 401.

time of the fixing price, the transport and retention charges as well as the probable outlay should also be taken into account. He further adds that at least in every fortnight the king should examine the price schedule, weighing and measuring instruments.[38] But in the subsequent period we do not find any reference of prices being fixed by the state. Moreover, there is a reference about the just price for the merchandise according to the locality or season, and to refrain from dishonest dealings.[39] It appears from the injuctions of Nārada and Bṛhaspati that "a purchased article can be returned back on the same day without damaging it, when it appears to the purchaser that he has made a bad bargain. They further add that if it is returned on the second day of purchase, the buyer shall lose the thirtieth part of the price, and twice as much if he returns on the third day. After that the purchaser cannot return it. Hence, it is the duty of the purchaser to examine the article carefully before buying it".[40]

Yājñavalkya says that heavy fines should be realised from those traders who carry on fraudulent business by wrong measurement of or adulteration or by charging more, and the rate of fine should vary according to the type of merchandise, its cost, and the particular situation.[41] According to Nārada and Bṛhaspati, a mechant found guilty of adulteration, or of selling old articles as new after repairing them shall be compelled to give the double quantity to the purchaser and to pay a fine equal in amount to the value of the article.[42] Bṛhaspati further states that what has been sold by an intoxicated or insane person, or at a very low price, or under the impulse of fear, or by one not his own master, or by an idiot, shall be relinquished by the purchaser and if he refuses to give it, it may be recovered from the purchaser by forcible means.[43]

Thus, the above evidences undoubtedly show that Mithilā was a great emporium of India, and played a very important part in the early national and international trade and commerce.

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38 *Manu*, VIII, pp. 402-03.

39 Cf. Maity, S. K., *Economic Life of Northern India*, pp. 127-28.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 125.

41 *Yāj.*, pp. 244-50.

42 *Br.*, XXII, 13, 18; *Nār.*, VIII, 7.

43 *Ibid.*, XVIII, 3, 4, 7 ,9.

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